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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will mark the international observance of World AIDS Day on Dec. 1 with a renewed commitment to caring for HIV-infected persons and a quest for advances through research.

VA is recognized as a leader in the study and treatment of HIV and AIDS. It has been the nation's largest single source of HIV and AIDS care since the beginning of the epidemic in the U.S., having cared for more than 45,000 patients with HIV since 1980. Today, 171 VA medical centers and more than 600 clinics treat up to 17,000 patients with HIV each year.

"VA, with the largest integrated health-care system in the nation, has a major role to play as a force for change in combating HIV," said Dr. Lawrence R. Deyton, Director of VA AIDS Service. "Veterans must see the HIV epidemic as another threat to our nation. As respected members of society, they can lead this battle taking place right now on our own soil."

Some VA facilities will mark World AIDS Day with special displays, distribution of literature, or other educational programs.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS has devoted the 1998 campaign for World AIDS Day to raising awareness of young people about the disease. It estimates that over 50 percent of new infections with HIV are occurring in individuals under the age of 25.

World AIDS Day 1998 comes as the VA health-care system is expanding its emphasis on primary and outpatient care. Outpatient services are a growing part of AIDS care and present greater opportunities to treat and counsel veterans with HIV and those at risk of developing HIV. Recent trends in HIV care show a dramatic decrease in the use of VA inpatient services as veterans are benefiting from access to all available HIV drugs and new diagnostic procedures.

As the largest provider of HIV services in the country, VA will bring together HIV care providers in the spring of 1999 at a conference, "Improving HIV Care Into the 21st Century: Integrated Care for the Multiply-Diagnosed."

VA is also redoubling its efforts in HIV research. VA has four specialized centers for research on AIDS -- Atlanta; Durham, N.C.; New York; and San Diego. VA scientists across the country last year received more than \$32.6 million from VA and other research sponsors to support 322 studies on diagnosis, treatment and prevention of the disease. In addition, in 1987 and 1988, VA established specialized AIDS clinical treatment units at its New York, Miami, San Francisco and West Los Angeles medical centers.

Recent research by VA investigators contributed to the recognition that blood levels of HIV viral genetic material (HIV RNA), in addition to measurements of immune system cells targeted by HIV (CD4 T lymphocytes), are reliable predictors of success of drug therapy. Measurement of HIV RNA levels is now considered a standard of practice in the care of persons with HIV infection.

VA has also launched an initiative to assess how VA clinicians implement HIV treatment guidelines, can better identify veterans with HIV, and establish strategies to improve HIV care. Another endeavor emphasizes clinical trials directed at new and promising HIV drugs.

VA's large network of medical centers and clinics provides an established system for large clinical trials,

historical and epidemiologic studies, drug treatment studies and vaccine studies. In seeking better understanding of HIV and AIDS, VA also works closely with many other organizations. These include VA-affiliated universities, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Defense and many pharmaceutical companies and independent research organizations.